

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS:
REFLECTIONS ON MY TIME AS A STUDENT CATALOGER

Colin Bitter
Graduate Library Assistant, Music Library
University of North Texas
February 2015

How did you start cataloging?

Prior to becoming a Graduate Library Assistant I was a Student Assistant. Jean Harden hired me in 2013 when I started library school. I started by going through some online tutorials so I could gain familiarity with MARC and how cataloging worked. These initial lessons provided cursory introduction to cataloging. Most of what I learned in the beginning came from direct communication with Jean. First I would catalog with her at my side, and then I would catalog independently, usually while Jean was there so I could ask questions (I had lots of them). Eventually I was able to work on my own, consulting Jean when necessary for all my “how” and “why” questions. I also spent a good portion of my first months at the library learning RDA by studying the Toolkit. As of now I carry out original and copy cataloging of all formats at the Music Library in addition to assisting Jean in training and overseeing three student catalogers.

How did you like cataloging early on? Did you have a knack for it?

In many ways, I think so. I have been around music, particular art music (which is still the bulk of what we interact with at the Music Library), from a very young age. Frequently, even in the beginning, I did not have to consult authorities since I have many dates memorized and also know quite a bit of repertoire, especially from the 19th and 20th centuries. Enjoying working with computer systems and a keen sense of organization also helped. Additionally, I am someone who enjoys running after something that can't be had, or perhaps something that does not exist; in this case that would be the ‘perfect record’ (the parallel in music would be a ‘perfect performance’). In many ways cataloging is similar to creating music; it takes practice through trial and error, trial and repetition, and other learning methods; to quote a musician, “I have to keep doing it so that I can keep doing it.”

What has helped you in cataloging?

Firstly, Jean. Having a good teacher to help you in cataloging itself (rather than simply learning theory in course-based cataloging) is vital in learning the trade. Mark McKnight (head music librarian and former cataloger), Janelle West, and Ralph Hartsock have also been extremely helpful.

Being in an environment where we see many different types of resources has been beneficial; it may have been more difficult to catch on quickly had I started at a smaller library with less variety.

I have also found that getting involved as much as possible (from the outset rather than waiting until the end of library school, of course) to be tremendously beneficial. This includes: subscribing to various listservs, reading about cataloging on my own time, examining the OPAC on my own time, examining the same OCLC records across different institutions’ OPACs on my own time, and maintaining general curiosity—how can we improve our catalog? What will future catalogs look like?

Additionally, gaining an understanding of how the library works and functions beyond the walls of Technical Services has helped; I did this by volunteering for work beyond cataloging when it was needed. This included: helping Andrew Justice pick up collections (gave me perspective on what the collection looked like in its original environment and also a better understanding of what it is we are receiving), and also working the service desk (how do the records look to the person working at the desk? How do patrons make use of the catalog?).

What didn't help?

Everyone at the library has been so generous in helping me learn, so it's hard to think of what hasn't helped me. One area might be our workspace. We work in a large workroom along with the processing unit. It has taken me a while to learn to work while multiple conversations are going on at once; I am working on it, though I still do my best work in absolute silence. Of course, the advantage in having a space like ours is that we can all confer about how to go about treating special items rather than sending e-mails or having to jump from office to office all day.

What qualifications made you a good candidate for a student cataloging position? If you were hiring a student cataloger, what would you look for?

- Background in music, preferably a degree in music though undergraduate students can catalog as well.
- Ability to pay extreme careful attention to detail over long periods of time; also the ability to change. The number of practices which have changed, both local and global, since I have started cataloging (2013) are not few.
- Proclivity for organization
- Ability to sit at a desk for long stretches of time
- Ability to listen
- A curious mind

What are the advantages to students who pursue part time cataloging work?

- Money
- Working in a library
- Working with music
- Working on campus (usually)
- Bettering research abilities (cataloging dramatically alters the way you look for information)

-Working at something beyond your specific area of study (music or otherwise) will complement said area

What are the advantages to libraries in employing student catalogers?

-They cost less than full-time staff (think about administration: it would be far easier to justify hiring students than new full-time staff)

-Expediting cataloging of the backlog

-Maintaining ties/outreach with areas of the college/university beyond the library

-Maintaining ties with the College/School/Department of Music

How do you motivate student catalogers?

-Money

-Demonstrating pride and interest in the work; for me I love to see the finished product in the OPAC. Since I also carry out original cataloging, my work frequently ends up in OCLC records.

-Demonstrating respect for the resources and the users of the library; communicating why what we do matters

Should professionals feel threatened by student catalogers? Why can't students do everything, at a fraction of the cost, if you have demonstrated that you can do it?

Regarding the latter, I am far from a seasoned cataloger. I am a beginner, perhaps approaching intermediate levels, in most ways. I am able to carry out copy and original cataloging at a good level, but I still encounter items where I need help from a full-time librarian.

I do not think librarians should feel threatened by the introduction of student catalogers into the workforce. In fact, employing students is probably more beneficial than detrimental to full-time librarians: students can carry out low-level tasks which may eat in to the librarian's higher-level duties, and if students are users of the library they can provide perspective on how they might use the catalog. Students might also be able to provide creative solutions to problems that seasoned professionals haven't thought of – my guess is most colleges and universities have intelligent students who would jump at the chance to work in a professional environment while in school. Of course a student with 6 months of experience cannot churn out quality copy in the same way a seasoned 30-year professional can, but does that matter? What is more, it is important to remember that at one point we all had no experience. From my own limited view of music cataloging I think it would be unwise for any institution *not* to use students in the task at hand if said institution a) has any kind of significant and consistent resource infusion (i.e., a backlog of named gifts or regular acquisitions) and b) has the resources, monetary and otherwise, to employ students.